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AUTHOR Straus, Murray A.
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ABSTRACT

Surveys of married and dating couples find that women assault their male partners at about the same rate as men assault female partners. When assaults serious enough to cause death were examined, it was found that in contrast to the extreme rarity of homicide by women outside the family, women kill their male partners at a rate that approaches the rate at which men kill their female partners. These findings based on family survey data and homicide data are in marked contrast to the findings from studies using data produced in the context of the criminal justice system on non-lethal assaults. The criminal justice data yield low rates of domestic assault by men, and even lower rates of domestic assault by women. The criminal justice data are so low because those rates are based on differential definitions of the appropriateness of reporting incidents to the police or to a National Crime Survey interviewer. Most domestic assaults by men, and almost all domestic assaults by women are filtered out because there is no injury and the victim therefore does not consider them a "real crime." In addition, the rates for women are particularly low because both male victims and the police may be especially reluctant to invoke the criminal justice system against women who assault their husbands. However, women produce less injury than do men. Domestic assaults by women need to be added to efforts to prevent assaults on women due to the moral wrongness of the act, the modeling of assaultive behavior, and to reduce the danger to women themselves. Further research is needed on gender differences in the objectives, meaning, and consequences of domestic assaults. (ABL)

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ASSAULTS BY WIVES ON HUSBANDS:

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRIMARY PREVENTION OF MARITAL VIOLENCE*

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Murray A. Straus
Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire
Durham, NH 03824 (603) 862-2594

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The 1975 National Family Violence Survey (NFVS) found that wives assault husbands at about the same rate as husbands assault wives (Straus, et al., 1980). These findings have been criticized on a number of grounds (summarized in Straus, 1990a). In view of these criticisms, and because I believed that assaults by women were largely in self defense (Straus, 1977, 1980; Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980), I did not pursue the issue for a number of years.

IMPORTANCE OF ASSAULTS BY WOMEN ON MALE PARTNERS

Certain developments led me to reconsider domestic assaults by women. First, as will be shown below, the 1985 replication of the National Family Violence Survey again found that women reported physically assaulting their husbands at about the same high rate as they reported assaults by their husbands.

Second, a major part of my research has become focused on "primary prevention" of domestic violence (Straus and Smith, 1990). The fundamental target of both victim services and primary prevention needs to be assaults by men on female partners because such attacks result in the more frequent and severe injury than assaults by women. This includes not only physical injury, but also psychological and economic victimization (Straus, 1980; Stets and Straus, 1990a). Moreover, as argued elsewhere (Straus, 1976, 1977), the first priority in primary prevention is to empower women by steps to attain equality between men and women in the economy, the family, politics, and other spheres of society; to eliminate the use of physical punishment in child rearing; and to change male attitudes and behavior about power and violence in the family. However, the findings reported in this paper suggest that efforts to reduce assaults by men must also include efforts to reduce assaults by women on male partners.

In addition to the implications for primary prevention, the question of domestic assaults by women needs to be readdressed because it raises an important theoretical issue. If it is true that, at home, women commit as many assaults as men, theories of aggression and violent crime need to be able to explain how this can coexist with the extremely low rates of assault by women in other settings. This may require a reformulation or specification of theories of aggression and violent crime. One cannot specify in advance the nature of the reformulation, but it could lead to new perspectives that may aid the in understanding aggression and violent crime in general.

The theoretical and human importance of these issues demands continued research. However, given the limitations of present knowledge and the difficult conceptual and methodological problems, debates over the nature and extent of criminal behavior by women, including the specific issue of female assaults, are unlikely to be settled soon by such research. The present paper illustrates those difficulties. It begins with a conceptual discussion of assault and the problems inherent in translating that concept into empirical data. The largest section of the paper reviews data on gender differences in spouse assault from five different sources. Those studies, together with findings in the section on initiation of assaults by women, lead to the conclusion that men and women have similar rates of assault on a marital or cohabiting partner.*1 The final sections of the paper discusses the implications of the findings for "primary prevention" of domestic assault.

FOCUS ON PHYSICAL ASSAULT

The conceptual approach of this paper is somewhat different than discussions of domestic violence found in research undertaken from the perspective of family studies and women's studies. It uses a criminological perspective that focuses on the crime, not on the character of a presumed class of criminals such as men or women. Thus, the paper, emphasizes the legal concept of physical assault.

The National Crime Panel Report defines assault as "An unlawful physical attack by one person upon another" (US Department of Justice, 1976). If the attack attempts to inflict serious bodily harm, or involves use of a deadly weapon, it is an "aggravated" assault; if not, it is a "simple" assault.

Reasons For Focus On Assault

There are a number of reasons for focusing on "assault" rather than on such questions as whether women are as "violent" as men.

1. The most important reason for focusing on "assault" is that assault refers to illegal violence, i.e. to a criminal attack or threat of attack on another person, and the concern of this paper is on that type of attack. This is more than a fine distinction. Many violent acts are not illegal, and therefor do not fit the legal definition of assault. Examples range from capital punishment of murderers to spanking children. Spanking fits the definition of physical violence*2 but it is not illegal in the United States. Therefore, the fact that women do more spanking than men because they continue to be the primary caregivers for children, does not figure in this paper.

2. Assault is preferable to the term "violent" because the latter concept designates a character trait. Although there are large individual differences in propensity to assault, the focus of this paper is the implications of gendered patterns of assault for programs aimed at primary prevention. For this purpose it is appropriate to concentrate on the institutionalized bases for domestic assaults, and especially male dominance in the major spheres of society, and the cultural legitimation of force to achieve important goals.*3

3. A large proportion of studies of "domestic violence," including the findings to be reported in this paper, use data obtained by means of the Conflict Tactics Scales or CTS (Straus, 1979, 1990a). This almost requires the use of the term assault. The CTS measures assaults in the legal sense given above. As Carmody and Williams (1987) note: "The physical aggression scale of the CTS is merely a method of identifying individuals who engage in assaultive acts... The seriousness of such acts must be addressed conceptually and empirically as an independent matter...[as must]...the meaning of the act to the parties involved, as well as to others..."

Measurement Of Assault

Despite clear statutory definitions, statistics on assault from different sources are created by a social process which differ in important ways. This paper, for example, draws on data created by the criminal justice system (the Uniform Crime Reports and the National Crime Survey), by the social service system (studies of residents of battered women shelters), and surveys of the general population. Each of these methods produces statistics that not only differ quantitatively, but also have a different meaning. One is not wrong and the other right. The various statistics to be presented below illustrate how each illuminates a different aspect of domestic assaults. The paper therefore includes comments on what is illuminated and what is hidden by these methods of generating assault statistics.

Police Data And Survey Data On Assault

Much of the research to be reported in this paper measures assault by means of the Conflict Tactics Scales. The CTS distinguishes between "minor" and "severe" assaults.*4 This distinction is intended to parallel the legal distinction between simple and aggravated assault. The replacement of the legal terms by parallel terminology is to remind readers about the difference between the operationalization of "severe" assault using the CTS with the operationalization of "aggravated" assault in the actual operation of the criminal justice system.

The CTS conceptualization of severe assault and the legal definition of aggravated assault are parallel because both use the act of attacking another as the criterion, regardless of whether an injury or bodily contact occurred. Marcus (1983:89), for example notes that "...physical contact is not an element of the crime...." The Uniform Crime Reports definition of aggravated assault includes the statement "...it is not necessary that an injury result when a gun, knife, or other weapon is used...." (FBI, 19885:21). Thus, the CTS classification of an attack with a weapon as a "severe" assault, even if the intended victim is untouched, parallels the UCR and the formal legal definition of an "aggravated" assault. However, for less dangerous attacks, such as kicking and punching, police and prosecutors actually tend to identify only attacks that result in serious injury as an aggravated assault (Ford, 1989). Consequently, kicking a spouse would most likely be ignored or treated as a simple assault by the police unless the victim required hospitalization; whereas the CTS follows the literal legal definition and classifies kicking a spouse as a "severe" assault even if there is no injury. Thus, rates based on household surveys need to take injury into account if the objective is to parallel the processes which create police statistics on assault. Injury adjusted rates were therefore computed and are presented below.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SPOUSE ASSAULT AND HOMICIDE RATES

National Family Violence Surveys (NFVS)

Sample and Method.*5 The rates of partner assault presented below are from the 1985 National Family Violence Surveys or NFVS (Straus and Gelles, 1986, 1990). The NFVS used a nationally representative sample of

6,002 married and cohabiting couples. In approximately half the cases, the data were obtained by interviewing the wife or female partner. Husbands or male partners were the respondents for the other half of the couples.

The NFVS data on domestic assaults was obtained by the Conflict Tactics Scales or CTS (Straus, 1979, 1990a). The CTS starts by asking respondents to think of the times during the previous 12 months, when they had a conflict with their partner or just got angry with them. Respondents are then given a list of tactics which they might have used in these situations of conflict or anger. The tactics ranged from calm discussion to attacks with a knife or a gun. The 1985 version of the CTS consisted of 19 tactics, nine of which refer to assaultive acts.*6 The assaultive acts are: threw something at the other; pushed, grabbed or shoved; slapped; kicked, bit or hit with a fist; hit or tried to hit with something; beat up the other; choked, threatened with knife or gun; used a knife or gun. The occurrence of these acts was used to compute the assault rates.

(Table 1 about here)

The previously published assault rates (Straus and Gelles, 1986, 1990) show that the wife-to-husband assault rate is slightly higher than the husband-to-wife assault rate. However, the seeming equality may occur because of a tendency by men to under-report their own assaults (Dutton, 1988; Edleson and Brygger, 1986; Jouriles and O'Leary, 1985; 1986; Stets and Straus, 1985a; Szinovacz, 1983). To control for male under-reporting, the assault rates were recomputed for this paper on the basis of information provided by the 2,947 women in the 1985 NFVS. Table 1 shows that women slightly exceed the male rate for minor assaults on a partner, and that men slightly exceed the female rate for severe assaults.*7 Studies of assaults in dating relationships (to be reviewed below) also show that women respondents report physically assaulting their partners at a rate as high or higher than the rate of physical assault by their male partners.

Since the rates in Table 1 are based on data obtained from women respondents, the near-equality in assault rates cannot be attributed to a gender bias in reporting. However, as pointed out in previous publications (Straus, 1977b, 1980; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980) female assault rates based on the CTS can be misleading if they represented acts of self defense because the use of force in self defense is not a criminal assault, and because they do not take into account the difference in the injuries resulting from assaults by men and women. The 1985 NFVS included data to investigate both these possibilities.

Injury Adjusted Rates. The greater injury sustained by women victims of domestic assault compared to men is documented in Stets and Straus (1990a). Those data can be used to adjust the rates in Table 1 to take into account whether the assault resulted an injury. Two injury estimates are available for representative samples of couples. The National Family Violence Survey found a rate of 3% for female victims and 0.5% for male victims of spouse assault (Stets and Straus, 1990a). Somewhat lower rates are reported by Brush (forthcoming, 1989) for another large national sample -- 1.2% of women victims and 0.2% of men victims. Using the higher of these two injury estimates, reduces the male domestic assault rate from

118 per 1,000 to 3.5 per thousand, and the female rate from 121 to 0.6 per 1,000.

These injury adjusted rates correspond more closely to police and National Crime Survey rates, They result in a rate of domestic assaults by men that is almost six times greater than the rate of domestic assaults by women, thus bringing out an important aspect of domestic assault. On the other hand, there are several disadvantages to rates based on injury (Straus 1990b:;79-83), two of which will be mentioned. One of the disadvantages is that the criterion of injury contradicts the new domestic assault legislation and new police policies. These statutes and policies (for example, New Hampshire RSA 173-B) encourage arrest on the basis of attacks, and do not require an observable injury.

Another disadvantage of injury as a criterion for domestic assault is that injury based rates omit the 97% of assaults by men which do not result in injury, but which are nonetheless a serious social problem. Without an adjustment for injury, NFVS produces an estimate of over six million women assaulted by a male partner each year, of which almost two million on are "severe" assaults (Straus and Gelles, 1990). If the injury adjusted rate is used, the estimate is reduced to 188,000 assaulted women per year. The figure of two million seriously assaulted women every year has been used in many legislative hearings and countless publications to indicate the prevalence of the problem. If that estimate had to be replaced by 188,000, it would under understate the extent of the problem and could handicap efforts to educate the public and secure funding for shelters and other services. Fortunately, that is not necessary. Both estimates can be used since each highlights a different aspect of the problem.

Other Surveys of Married Couples

The equal assault rates found by both the 1975 and 1985 National Family Violence Surveys might be a function of the similar methodology of the two studies. The results from two other studies of community samples which use different methods can help answer this question. Scanzoni (1978) studied a sample of 321 women. Violence was measured by response to a question which asked what they did in cases of persistent conflict. Sixteen percent (160 per thousand) reported trying to hit the husband -- a figure which is somewhat higher than the female assault obtained by studies using the CTS.

The most comprehensive survey of domestic assaults is the National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet, Bumpass and Call, 1988). Assault was measured by asking "During the past year, how many fights with your partner resulted in (you/him/her) hitting, shoving, or throwing things at (you/him/her). Brush (forthcoming, 1989) analyzed this data for the 5,474 married couples in the sample. Although the rates are not given, Brush reports finding no significant difference between wives and husbands.

Dating Couples

Sugarman and Hotaling (1989) summarize the results of 21 studies which reported gender differences in assault. Most of these studies used

the CTS to measure assault, and produced similar results to the studies of married couples using the CTS. Sugarman and Hotaling comment that "A... surprising finding ... is the higher proportion of females than males who self-report having expressed violence in a dating relationship" (italics added). The mean for these studies is 32.9% of men and 39.3% of women. Moreover, other studies published since their review (for example, Pirog-Good and Stets, 1989; Stets and Straus, 1990b) further confirm the high rate of assault by women in dating relationships.

One explanation for the high rate of assaults by women of dating partners may be that it consists primarily of ritualistic minor assaults, such as a slap. However, the three studies reviewed by Sugarman and Hotaling which give separate rates for minor and severe assaults are inconsistent. Two did find that the rate of severe assault is lower for women than men, but one found no difference even in respect to severe assaults. Another possible explanation is that the women were resisting a rape. The use of force to resist rape might have been reported in response to the CTS questions. If so, it would erroneously raise the rate of assault by women because use of force to resist rape is not a criminal act.

Crime Statistics

National Crime Survey. The National Crime Survey (NCS) is an annual study of approximately 60,000 households, conducted for the Department of Justice by the Bureau of the Census. Analysis of the NCS for the period 1973-75 by Gaquin (1977-78) found an overall rate 2.2 per 1,000 couples. By comparison, the 1985 NFVS found a rate of 161 per 1,000 which is 73 times higher. As for gender differences, the NCS rate for assaults by husbands was 3.9 per 1,000 and 0.3 for assaults by wives. Thus, according to the NCS, the rate of domestic assaults by men is 13 times greater than the rate of domestic assaults by women. Gender differences in the NCS are therefore completely different than the findings from the 1985 NFVS and from the studies of assaults among dating couples.

What can explain the extremely low overall rates of domestic assault by both men and women in the NCS? The NCS is probably the largest and most carefully conducted epidemiological survey of crime, including assaults. Consequently, the low rate is probably not attributable to deficiencies in the quality of the NCS. A more likely reason lies in differences between the context of the NCS versus the other studies. The NCS is presented as a study of crime, whereas the CTS is presented as a study of family problems. The difficulty with a "crime survey" as the context for estimating rates of domestic assault is that most people think of being kicked by their partner as wrong, but not a "crime" in the legal sense. It takes relatively rare circumstances such as an injury or an attack by a former spouse who "has no right to do that," to perceive the attack as a "crime" (Langen and Innes, 1986). Finally, NCS interviews are conducted with both partners present. The presence of the assailant could further reduce the probability of reporting an attack by a spouse.

The circumstances that probably produce the drastic underestimate of domestic assault rates by the NCS may also produce the even lower rate of domestic assaults by women. As suggested above, one circumstance which prompts reporting is the occurrence of an injury. However, since attacks by women are much less likely to result in an injury, they tend not to be

reported. In addition to lack of injury, men may be even more reluctant than women to report an assault by a spouse because of male values concerning the importance of being able to physically defend ones self, especially from a woman.

Police Calls. Police records of calls for domestic assaults by a male assailant are also many times greater than the rate involving female assailants. Dobash and Dobash (1979), for example, found that of intra-family assault cases in two Scottish cities only 1% were assaults by wives. Police data on domestic violence are probably influenced by the same processes as filter out all most domestic assaults from the National Crime survey, and especially domestic assaults by women. The police are involved in less than 7 percent of all domestic assaults (Kaufman Kantor and Straus, 1990). The other 93% of the cases are probably omitted because no injury occurred and because of reluctance to arrest women for domestic assaults.

What The Crime Statistics Measure. Although the NCS and police reports produce much lower rates of domestic assault (including lower rates of assault by men) than do surveys of family problems, it can be argued that the NCS and police data are preferable because they measures what the public perceives to be a "real crime." That is, the NCS tends to include only physical attacks between intimates that respondents define as criminal (for example, being punched by a former spouse). Using the same phenomenological perspective, it can be argued that much of what is measured by the CTS (such as being punched by a current spouse) is not an appropriate measure of assault because, even though respondents regard such acts as bad, they tend not to perceive them as a crime in the legal sense. A limitation of such a phenomenological approach is that the legal definition of assault does not require either the victim or the perpetrator to acknowledge the criminal nature of the act. Indeed, in the typical male on male assault, it is common for both sides to believe that no crime has been committed.

Female Victim Samples

Studies of domestic assaults based on data provided by residents of shelters for battered women rarely obtain or report information on assaults by women, and when they do, they ask only about self-defense. Pagelow's questionnaire (1981) for example presents respondents with a list of "factors responsible for causing the battering" but the list does not include an attack by the women, therefore precluding finding information on female initiated altercations. Pagelow also asked if the respondent had ever used a weapon on her spouse. This question asks about any use of a weapon, i.e. the question does not specify the circumstances. However, the statistics are presented as though all instances of the a wife's use of a weapon are reported as self-defense.

Two studies of shelter residents used the CTS. Although the CTS is designed to obtain data on assaults by both parties, one of these studies (Okun, 1986) apparently omitted the questions on assaults by the female partner. However, the study by Giles-Sims (1983) included both parts of the CTS. She found that in the year prior to coming to a shelter, 50% of the women reported assaulting their partner and in the six months after leaving the shelter, 41.7% reported an assault against a spouse. Walker

(1984:174) found that one out of four women in battering relationships had "used physical force to get something you wanted."

Spouse Homicide Rates

Homicide rates published by the FBI show that only 14% of homicide offenders are women (calculated from Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1989: unnumbered table at bottom of page 9). However, the percentage of women offenders varies tremendously according the relationship between offender and victim, as shown in Figure 1.*8

(Figure 1 about here)

The lower left corner of Figure 1 shows that for the US as a whole, female perpetrated homicides of strangers occur at a rate that is less than a twentieth the male rate. The female share goes up somewhat for murders of acquaintances. As for murders of family members, women committed them at a rate that was almost half the rate of men in the period 1976-79 and more than a third of the male rate during the period 1980-84. However, "family" includes all relatives, whereas the main focus of this paper is heterosexual couples. There are two recent gender specific estimates of the rates for partner homicides (Straus, 1986; Browne and Williams, 1989) and these are shown on the right side of Figure 1. They show that women murder male partners at a rate that is 56% and 62% as great as the rate of partner homicides by husbands. This is far from equality but it also indicates that, even when the assaults are so extreme as to result in death, in the marital role, women approach the rate of men; whereas as noted above, for murders of strangers, the female rate is only a twentieth of the male rate.

Summary

Surveys of married and dating couples find that women assault their male partners at about the same rate as men assault female partners. When assaults serious enough to cause death are examine, it was found that in contrast to the extreme rarity of homicide by women outside the family, women kill their male partners at a rate that approaches the rate at which men kill their female partners.

The findings based on family survey data and homicide data are in marked contrast to the findings from studies using data produced in the context of the criminal justice system on non-lethal assaults. The criminal justice system data yield low rates of domestic assault by men, and even lower rates of domestic assault by women. It was argued that the criminal justice data on domestic assaults are so low because those rates are based on differential definition of the appropriateness of reporting incidents to the police or to a National Crime Survey interviewer. Specifically, I suggested that most domestic assaults by men, and almost all domestic assaults by women, are filtered out because there is no injury and the victim therefore does not consider them a "real crime." In addition, the rates for women are particularly low because both male victims and the police may be especially reluctant to invoke the criminal justice system against women who assault their husbands.

SELF DEFENSE AND ASSAULTS BY WOMEN

It is widely believed that attacks on spouses by women are largely a response to or a defense against assault by the partner. However, the evidence to date is ambiguous. For non-lethal assaults by women much of the "data" is simple assertion (e.g., Pagelow, 1981; Straus, 1977a,b; Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980) and the remainder is based on the same type of non-representative sample as produced the extremely low assault rate by female partners (e.g. Saunders, 1986). For lethal assaults, a number of studies suggest that a substantial proportion are self-defense (see discussion in Browne and Williams, 1989), but that evidence is also ambiguous (Mann, 1989). For example, the widely cited study by Wolfgang (1958) refers to "victim precipitated" homicides, but the case examples indicate that "victim precipitated" homicides include retaliation as well as self-defense.

As for the National Family Violence Surveys, an analysis using the 1975 survey was also interpreted as suggesting a self defense explanation of partner assaults by women (Straus, 1980), but the actual data are inconclusive and also combine self defense with retaliation. The 1985 survey attempted to correct this and to demonstrate the self-defensive nature of female domestic assaults by including a specific question on who hit first, by using data obtained from women respondents, and by distinguishing between minor and severe assaults.

Mutuality of Assault

A first approach to the self-defense issue was to classify the 445 couples in the NFVS for whom one or more assaultive incidents was reported by a women respondent according to whether one or both engaged assaulted. The largest category (50.1%) were couples characterized by mutual assault in the sense that both engaged in assaultive acts during the one year period covered by the survey.*9 The remaining half of the couples were about equally divided between those in which the husband was the only one to engaged in an assault (24.9%) and the wife was the only assaulter (25.1%). Brush (forthcoming, 1989) reports similar results for the couples in the National Survey of Families and Households.

Most assaults between American couples are "minor" or "simple" assaults such as slapping and throwing things at the spouse. Perhaps the real gender difference occurs in assaults which carry a greater risk of causing an injury such as punching, kicking, and attacks with weapons. This hypothesis was tested using the 211 women who reported one or more instance of a "severe" assault. The distribution was found to be different. Only 35.2% fell into the Both category. However, of the remaining two thirds of the cases, almost as many were in the Wife Only category (29.6%) as in the Husband Only category (35.2%).

The findings just reported show that regardless of whether the analysis is based on all assaults, or is focused on dangerous assaults, about as many women as men, attack a spouse who has not hit them during a one year period. This is inconsistent with the "self-defense" explanation for the high rate of domestic assault by women. However, it is possible that, among the couples where both assaulted, the women were acting in self-defense. This issue is examined in the next section.

Initiation of Attacks

A more direct approach to the self-defense issue was used in the 1985 survey. Respondents were asked, "Lets talk about the last time you and your partner got into a physical fight and (MOST SEVERE ACT) happened. In that particular instance, who started the physical conflict, you or your partner?"

According to the 428 women who responded to the question regarding who initiated the physical conflict, their partner struck the first blow in 42.6% of the cases, they hit first in 52.7% of the cases, and she could not remember or could not disentangle who hit first in the remaining 4.7% of the cases. Almost identical results were obtained by Gryl and Bird (1989) who found that "Respondents in violent dating relationships indicated that their partners initiated the violence 51% of the time; they initiated it 41% of the time; and both were equally responsible 8% of the time." Thus, in addition to physically assaulting a partner about as often as men, these two studies indicate that women are also the first to hit about as often as men. These results do not support the hypothesis that assaults by women on their partners primarily are acts of self defense or retaliation.

Caution is needed regarding these findings for at least two reasons. First, some respondents may have answered the question in terms of who began the argument, not who began hitting. Interviewers were instructed to rephrase the question in such cases. However, there may have been instances in which the misunderstanding of the question went unnoticed.

A second reason for caution is the limited data available in the NFVS on the context of the assaults. Who initiates an assault and who is injured are important aspects of the contextual information needed to fully understand gendered aspects of intra-family assault, but they are not sufficient. For example, there may have been an escalation of assaults throughout the relationship, with the original attacks by the man. The fact that the most recent incident happened to be initiated by the female partner ignores the history and the context producing that act, which may be one of utter terror. This scenario is common in the cases of women who kill abusive male partners. Battered women may kill their partner when he is not attacking them and thus appear to not be acting in self defense. However, as Browne 1987) and Jurick (1989) show, the traditional criteria for self-defense are based on criteria and assumptions based on male characteristics and which ignore physical size and strength differences and ignore the economic dependency which locks some women into relationships in which they have legitimate grounds for fearing for their lives. The same scenario is often recounted by clients of shelters for battered women. However, caution is also needed in extrapolating from the situation of women in those extreme situation to the pattern of assaults that characterizes couples in the general population. As will be discussed in more detail below, it is hazardous to extrapolate from "clinical samples" of this type to the general population without additional evidence (Straus, 1990b). Let us assume, however, that assaults initiated by women reflect a long prior history of victimization. Even if that is the case, it is a response that is usually ineffective and one which often produces further assaults by the male partner (Bowker, 1983; Feld and Straus, 1989; Gelles and Straus, 1988: Chapter 7; Straus, 1974).

GENDER AND CHRONICITY OF ASSAULT

Although the prevalence rate of domestic assaults by women is about the same as that for men, men may engage in more repeated attacks. This hypothesis was tested by computing the mean number of assaults among couples for which at least one assault was reported by a female respondent. According to these 367 women, their partners averaged 7.21 assaults during the year, and they themselves averaged 5.95 assaults. The frequency of assault by men is therefore 21% greater than the frequency of assault by women. If the analysis is restricted to "severe" assaults, the men averaged 6.1 and the women 4.28, which is a 42% greater frequency of assault by men. Both these figures confirm the hypothesized greater repetitiveness of violence by men. At the same time, the fact that the average number of assaults by men is even higher should not obscure the fact that almost six assaults on husbands per year, including over four severe assaults, indicates a repetitive pattern by women as well as men in such relationships.

THE REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE FALLACY

For brevity of exposition this section will use the terms "community" study and "clinical" study to contrast surveys of family and dating relationships with studies based on criminal justice system data or the experiences of women in shelters for battered women. It was suggested earlier that the discrepancies between the findings of the two types of studies do not occur because one is accurate and the other is not. Rather, each illuminates different facets of domestic assault.

Clinical and criminal justice system statistics tend to reflect cases characterized by chronic severe assaults, injury, or assault by a person who is no longer recognized as an intimate, such as a former spouse. These characteristics violate the limitations of the norms tolerating assault in marriage and therefore lead to the police being called and to the assault being reported in the context of a "crime" survey. Men are the perpetrators of most assaults of that type. On the other hand, the assaults uncovered by community surveys of family and dating relationships are much less chronic (an average of about 5 times per year versus 60 times per year for shelter residents), rarely result in injury, and are carried out by partners in a continuing relationship.

Just as it is dangerous to generalize from a clinical population to the population at large (the so called "clinical fallacy"), the huge difference in the chronicity of violence between the violent couples in the National Family Violence Survey and the chronicity of assaults against women in shelters, suggests that there is also a "representative sample fallacy" (Straus, 1990b). The "battered women" in the NFVS are not nearly as victimized as the women in shelters, many of whom experienced an attack every week and may be living in continuing danger of severe bodily harm or even death. That is a qualitatively different situation and one in which the victim may not dare to lift a finger until a last desperate effort in the form of a lethal attack. Thus, the high frequency of assault and the initiation of assault by so many of the women in the NFVS may not apply to women in shelters and to women who kill an abusive partner.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRIMARY PREVENTION

The NFVS and a number of other studies are consistent in showing a high rate of assault on male partners by women in the general population. In addition, the data presented does not support the hypothesis that these assaults are primarily in self defense. One out of four of the women who reported assaulting their partner indicated that he had not hit her during the same one year referent period. Moreover, among couples characterized by assaults by both, about half the women reported that they struck the first physical blow. Nevertheless, given the fact that assaults by women are much less likely to produce an injury (Brush, forthcoming 1989; Stets and Straus, 1990a; Sullivan, 1989), the current emphasis on services for female victims of domestic assault remains as the first priority. However, although assaults by women may usually have only minor physical consequences, I suggest that they have major consequences for helping to perpetuate the traditional tolerance of physical assault between married or cohabiting partners. To the extent that this is the case, assaults by women have important implications for primary prevention of domestic assaults.*10

The implication for primary prevention is based on the idea that violence tends to engender further violence. To the extent that this is correct, the theoretical analysis to be presented below suggests that efforts to prevent assaults by men must include efforts to reduce assaults by women as well as men. Although this may seem like "victim blaming" to some, there is an important difference. Recognizing that assaults by women are one of the causes does not justify assaults by men. It is the responsibility of both men and women to refrain from physical attacks, including retaliation, at home as elsewhere.*11

There seems to be an implicit norm permitting or encouraging minor assaults by women in certain circumstances. Stark and McEvoy (1970) found about equal support for a wife hitting a husband as for a husband hitting a wife; and Greenblat (1983) found that both men and women are more accepting of wives hitting husbands than of husbands hitting wives. She suggests that it is because "...female aggressors are far less likely to do physical harm..." These norms are probably transmitted in many ways. For example, although quantitative data is lacking, conversations with women acquaintances suggest that a large numbers of girls have been told by their mother "If he gets fresh, slap him." Getting fresh may mean a sexual proposition or it may mean unwanted touching. In either case, responding by slapping is an example of correcting a wrong by physical violence, and that sets a dangerous precedent. Even casual observation of the mass media suggests that such ritualized "slap the cad" behavior is presented almost every day as an implicit model to millions of women on television or in a movie or novel.

Let us assume that most of the assaults by women fall into the "slap the cad" genre and are not intended to, and only rarely do physically injure the husband. The danger to women is that such behavior increases the probability of assaults by men (Bowker, 1983; Feld and Straus, 1989). Sometimes this is immediate and severe retaliation. But regardless of whether that occurs, a more indirect but no less important effect may occur in the form of further legitimizing assaults on a spouse. This suggests the hypothesis that the assaults by women discussed in the preceding paragraph tend to reinforce the traditional tolerance of assault

in marriage. The moral justification of assault implicit when she slaps or throws something at him for something outrageous, strengthens implicit norms which justify assaults by men. "Just a slap" tends to provide men with a precedent. It reinforces the moral justification for slapping her when she is doing something outrageous, being obstinate, nasty, or "not listening to reason" as he sees it. To the extent that this is correct, one of the many steps needed for primary prevention of assault is for women to forsake even "harmless" physical attacks on male partners and children. Women must insist on non-violence by their sisters, just as they rightfully insist on it by men.

Acknowledging the fact of domestic assaults by women is painful and the statistics are likely to be used by misogynists and apologists for male violence. On the other hand, I suggest that the cost of denial and suppression may be even greater because it can undermine the effort to reduce assaults by men. Denying the existence of these assaults (see Pleck, et al., 1977 for an example of such denial, and the reply by Steinmetz, 1978) in my opinion, inadvertently helps to perpetuate the very problem these authors seek to end. A more productive solution is to confront the issue and work towards eliminating assaults by women. The safety of women demands no less.

To a certain extent this is already occurring. Almost all shelters for battered women now confront part of this problem by policies designed to deal with spanking and physical child abuse by shelter residents. Some are also addressing the problem of female assaults on male partners. But primary prevention requires carrying this message to women in general. Fortunately, this can be consistent with the campaign against wife beating, because female assaults seem to grow out of the same cultural and structural roots as male violence. Both are associated with early socialization into violence by physical punishment and by observing assaults between parents, with cultural norms that implicitly condone or encourage use of physical force to correct wrongs, and with gender inequality (Straus, 1980; 1983). Browne and William's findings (1989) are encouraging in this respect because they show that increases in services for battered women and increases in the status of women relative to men are associated with a reduction in homicides by women of male partners.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Gender Differences In Assault

The evidence reported in this paper indicates that women engage in minor assaults against a partner at a slightly higher rate than men, and that men engage in more severe assaults at a slightly higher rate than women, although neither of these differences are statistically significant. In addition to engaging in physical assaults against a marital or cohabiting partner about as often as men, women also strike the first blow about as often as men and are the only partner to assault the spouse in about one quarter of all marriages where assaults occur. Regardless of whether the assault rate for women is higher or lower than the rate of assaults by men, the important point from the prospective of primary prevention is that the rate of assaults by women on male partners, like the rate of assaults by men on women partners, is extremely high.

The number of assaults by itself, however, ignores the context, meaning, and consequences of these assaults. The fact that women produce less injury than men is a critical difference because it means that although the assault rate may be approximately the same, women are the predominant victims (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980; Stets and Straus, 1990a). Consequently, first priority in both services for victims and primary prevention must continue to be directed toward assaults by men. At the same time, assaults by women must also be addressed because they are part of the larger socio-cultural pattern supporting violence that pervades so many aspects of American society, including both "legitimate violence" such as physical punishment of children and capital punishment of criminals and "criminal violence" such as rape and homicide (Baron and Straus, 1987, 1988, 1989; Baron, Straus, and Jaffee, 1988).

There are probably other important differences between men and women in assaults on a partner. For example, men may typically hit or threaten to hit as a control tactic, i.e. to force some specific behavior on pain of injury, but this may be rare for women. Women, on the other hand, may slap a partner or pound on his chest as an expression of outrage or in frustration from his having turned a deaf ear to repeated attempts to discuss some critical issue (Greenblat, 1983). Women may strike out at a partner because they sense that he is about to attack them as suggested by Saunders (1989) and Walker (1984). Empirical research is needed to test these hypotheses about gender differences in the meaning and purpose of assaults on a partner. Nevertheless, regardless of whether these gender differences in the context and phenomenology of assault are correct, they do not indicate that no assault has occurred. Nor do differences between men and women in the, history, meaning, objectives, and consequences of assaults refute the hypothesized legitimation of assault on a spouse that occurs as a result of assaults by women. Only empirical research can resolve that issue.

Policy Implications

Domestic assaults by women need to be added to efforts to prevent assaults on women for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most fundamental reason is the intrinsic moral wrong of assaults on a spouse, as expressed in the fact that such assaults are criminal acts, even when no injury occurs. A second reason is the modeling of assaultive behavior for the next generation. Assaults by mothers are as strongly related to violence by children as are assaults by fathers (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980; Straus, 1983). A third and most immediately important reason for actions to reduce domestic assaults by women is the danger to women. Feld and Straus (1989) found that if the female partner also engaged in an assault, it increased the probability that assaults will persist or escalate in severity over the one year period of their study; whereas if only one partner engaged in physical attacks, the probability of desistance increased.

Further research is needed on gender differences in the objectives, meaning, and consequences of domestic assaults. This research could make an important theoretical contribution and could provide the information base for programs of primary prevention of intra-family assault. Especially important are studies which trace out the natural history of assaults on a spouse, starting with the circumstances and meanings attached to the first incident and subsequent incidents.*[12] Such studies

could test the hypothesis that assaults by women provide moral justification for assaults by men. If the research confirms that hypothesis, it would indicate the need to add reduction of assaults by women to efforts to protect women from assault by their male partners.

ENDNOTES

1. For brevity of exposition, the terms "wife" and "wives," and parallel terms referring to men, will sometimes be used to cover not only married couples, but also cohabiting and dating couples when the context is one in which the reference is to all three types of couples. For an analysis of differences and similarities between married and cohabiting couples in the 1975 study, see Yllo (1978) and Yllo and Straus (1981). For the 1985 NFVS, see Stets and Straus (1990b).

2. "An act carried out with the intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person" (Gelles and Straus, 1979).

3. The terms "violent act" or "violence," when used to refer to a physical attack, might have been used instead of assault. However, violence in this sense is too easily confused with "violent" as a character trait. There is a similar relationship between the concepts of assault and violence and the concepts of "physical aggression" as used in social psychology. I interpret violence to be synonymous with physical aggression as those terns are defined by social psychologists such as Bandura (1973) or Berkowitz (1962); and "violent" is synonymous with the concept of "physically aggressive" as used in personality studies. See Gelles and Straus (1979) for further explication.

4. The "severe assault" measure is based on the occurrence of acts that are judged to have a higher probability of causing an injury than the acts in the minor assault list. Thus, kicking is classified as severe because kicking a spouse has a much greater potential for producing an injury than the acts in the "minor assault" list such slapping. The acts making up the severe assault index are kicked, bit, punched, hit with an object, beat up, threatened with a knife or gun, and used a knife or gun.

I considered replacing the term "minor assault" with "common assault" on the grounds that "minor" can be interpreted as devaluing the criminal nature of those acts. However, although "common" is descriptively accurate in the sense that such assaults are more frequent than those classified as "severe," it ignores the original conceptual basis of the distinction -- the lesser risk of injury (Straus, 1979), and it would also make terminology in this paper inconsistent with the usage in many previous papers.

5. Detailed information on the sample and methodology is given in previous publications, including Gelles and Straus (1988), Straus and Gelles, 1986, 1990).

6. The 1985 rates reported in this chapter are higher than those in the paper comparing violence rates in 1985 with those found in the 1975-76 (Straus and Gelles, 1986) because the need for comparability meant that the analysis could not use the 1985 additions to the CTS list of violent acts (described earlier), and also could not use the 1985 additions to the

sample (children under three, single parents, and information about marriages which had recently been terminated).

7. The rates for assaults by women based on reports of men are almost identical to the rates based on reports by women. However, the rates for assaults by men based on reports of male respondents are much lower than those based on reports by female respondents and I believe that they almost certainly understate the actual incidence of male assaults (Straus, 1990a). For this reason, and to save space, rates based on reports of male respondents are omitted. However, they are presented in Stets and Straus (1990a).

8. The rates used to create the female percentage of homicide offenses against strangers, acquaintances and family members in Figure 1 are from the Comparative Homicide File (Williams and Flewelling, 1988; Straus and Williams, 1988). The rates for homicide of strangers are: Female-0.1, Male-2.89; for homicide of acquaintances: Female-0.94, Male-7.11; and for homicides of family members: Female-1.31, Male-2.81. The 1984 rates for homicide of spouses estimated by Straus (1986) are Female-.34, Male-.55; and the rates estimated by Brown and Williams, 1988) are Female-1.4, Male-2.5.

9. Given greater male physical size and strength and male training in physical fighting, mutuality of assault does not mean mutuality of victimization. Thus the large proportion of couples in the "both" or "mutual" assault category is not inconsistent with the previously cited findings showing that women suffer grater injury.

10. Among the other reasons are the potential theoretical insights to be gained by addressing this difficult issue and the implicit contract under which society supports basic research is an obligation to report findings, even if they are contradictory to the investigators beliefs and values. Of course, a scientist also has an obligation to clearly indicate the limitations of the findings, and to warn about possible misinterpretations and limitations, as I have repeatedly done in the case of partner assaults by women (Straus, 1977, 1990a; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980).

11. This paragraph refers to legal responsibility. The informal norms, however, tend in the opposite direction, and specifically the principle of "if hit, hit back." I discovered this when I taught my son at age 9 to not hit back. Some neighbors expressed concern, as one put it, "with John's moral development."

12. There have been a number of studies which do that, such as Browne (1987) and Giles-Sims (1983). However, these excellent studies describe the process as it operates at the "clinical level" and, as noted in the section on The Representative Sample Fallacy, there are grounds for believing that the findings may be misleading as a basis for primary prevention efforts targeted toward the general population (see also Straus, 1990b).

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Female Perpetrated Homicides As Percent Of Male Rate, By Relationship to Victim

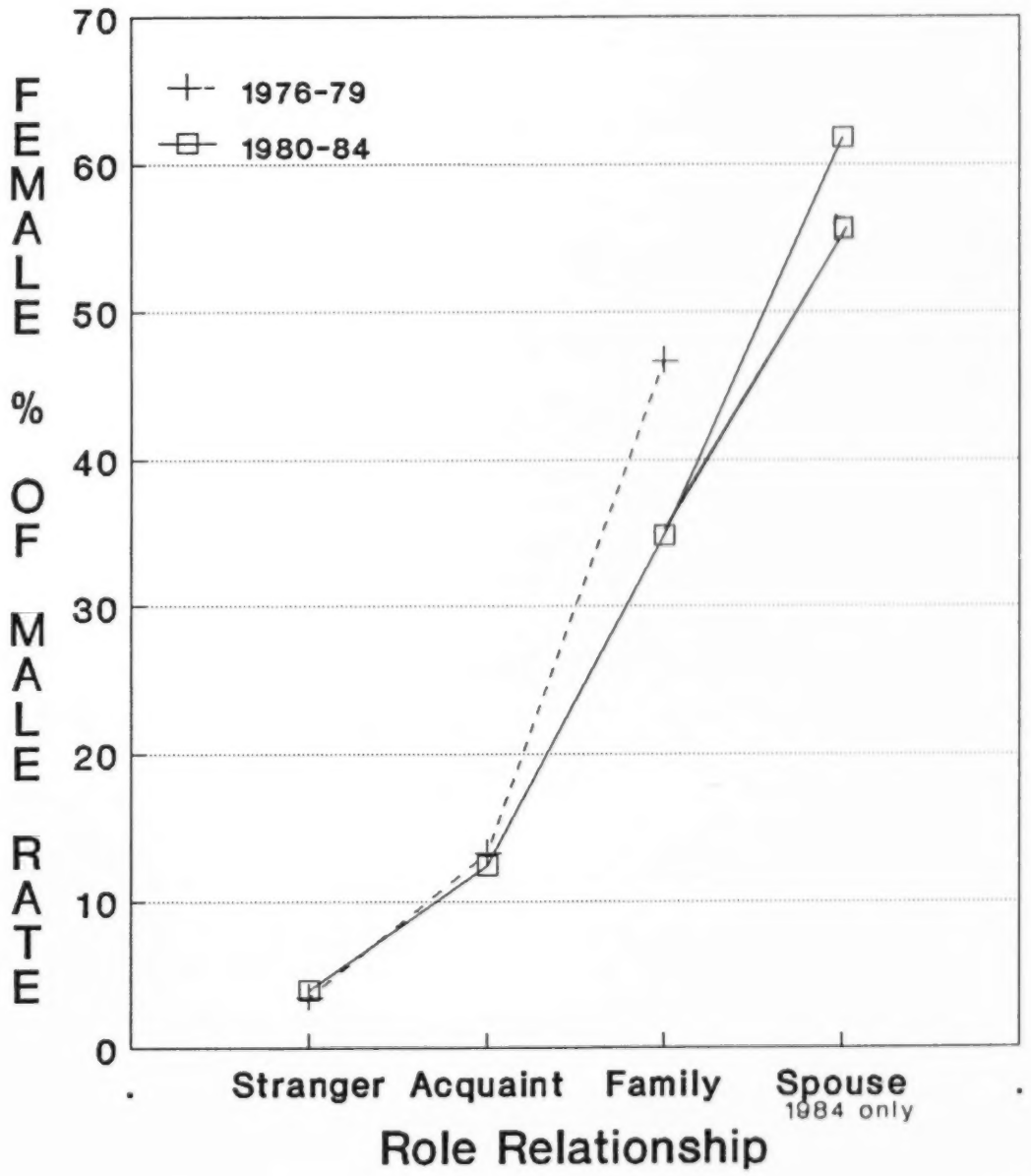

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Table 1. Marital Assault Rates Per 1,000
based on 2,947 Female Respondents

Type of Assault	Rate Per 1,000		
	Total	Minor Only	Severe
Husb-to-Wife	118	69	49
Wife-to-Husb	121	77	44